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ABSTRACT

High schools in America have been relatively impervious to change during the last few decades despite many reform efforts and reports, which, while proliferating goals and tasks placed on the schools, failed to mobilize a new consensus about education. In 1959 the post-Sputnik Conant Report decried the lag in science education. Federally funded projects were developed to reform the sciences, mathematics, English, and social studies curriculum. Educational foundations and professional associations developed new curricula in which excellence was the goal. These reforms did not live up to expectations, mainly because the subject-centered curriculum failed to address the need for comprehensive reorganization of the total school curriculum. Then, in the late 1960's, as public confidence in education again began to erode, Charles Silberman captured the mood of criticism by typifying schools as intellectually stultifying prisons rather than places of joy and discovery. In the 1970's the national commissions called for breaking down barriers that separated youth from society. The lasting impact of these reforms was also minimal; the structure of U.S. secondary education has not changed. However, there is hope that the current reform reports, including the current Study of the American High School being conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, on which this report is based, will be more effective, because there is a stronger base of educational theory and research to draw upon and there is a more realistic view of the process and limitations of reform. (BY)

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RHETORIC AND REFORM: HIGH SCHOOL REFORM IN THE
POST-CONANT PERIOD (REMARKS BEFORE THE HISTORY OF
EDUCATION SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING)

by

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October 15, 1982

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Washington, DC

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REMARKS OF DAVID HASELKORN
HISTORY OF EDUCATION SOCIETY
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Good morning, it's a great pleasure to be here. Let me begin, if I may, by telling you a little bit about the Carnegie Foundation Study of the American High School. Essentially, the study represents a number of concurrent efforts:

- A review and synthesis of policy and research literature relevant to all aspects of public secondary schools.
- Analysis of data on teaching and learning from the Study of Schooling directed by John Goodlad at UCLA, as well as analysis of data from High School and Beyond and data from the National Longitudinal Study begun in 1972 by the National Center for Education Statistics.
- Visits to a number of exemplary schools around the country.
- Intensive month-long ethnographic observation in 15 representative schools.

- A two-stage grants program that, in its initial phase, will provide approximately \$1,000 to \$3,000 self-study grants to as many as 150 schools around the nation. Larger second phase grants will be made to selected schools. These will be tied more closely to the recommendations of the Carnegie Study.
- Finally, periodic review of our research and drafts by a distinguished national panel which includes this meetings' keynote speaker, President Cremin, who is also a member of the Foundation Board of Trustees.

The History of the American High School is an important element in our research. Unlike our colleagues, however, our study will not produce a separate volume devoted to the subject. Rather, the history of the institution will be threaded throughout our report. In it, particular attention will be paid to national demographic, economic, political, social and other contextual changes and the implications they have had for the high school and the goals the nation has set for secondary schooling.

We have tried to identify pivotal moments when the sense of national identity shifted, when new national priorities replaced old aspirations, and new demands were consequently placed on the

schools. Thus new goals were added to the school's agenda, but old ones were seldom subtracted.

In choosing several turning points, we recognize that we run the risk of slighting other periods: The New Deal programs for youth, for example, or the Eight Year Study. Periods less well known to educational historians, but which may yet prove important in the long run to our understanding of youth policy and the directions schools have taken. That's why I was particularly interested in Dr. Hampel's remarks about the school s in the 40 s and 50 s and the persistence of progressivism. Your study's more intensive historical approach will undoubtedly be an important contribution to the continual widening of our historical understanding of the process of reform.

My own interests reflect the Foundation's concern with the history of the high school in the last 25 years. We've been particularly interested in the major reform proposals of the last quarter century, starting with the Conant Report, but including, retrospectively, the curriculum reform movement, whose beginnings antedated the Conant study by several years. Specifically, we've examined the work of the major national commissions since Conant that have attempted to address the omnibus problems of secondary education. A recent anniversary makes such a review especially timely. 25 years ago this month Sputnik was hurled into orbit by the Soviet Union. The anniversary was marked in newspapers

around the country by interviews with educational policy makers. Almost wistfully, they recalled the national commitment to education which that one act precipitated. Neither before nor since has consensus about the goals of education been as strong in this country. A review of the reform attempts in education since then traces an extraordinary proliferation of goals placed upon the school. Remarkably, the high school hasn't changed much. But a review of the reform efforts themselves is a fascinating chapter in educational history.

In a 1980 article in the Teacher's College Record, Tyack, Kirst, and Hansot identify the post-Sputnik era as one of "three major periods of educational reform". The Conant Report on the American High School is perhaps so well known that it needs no further mention. But even before Sputnik, and before Dr. Conant's report swept the country, the National Science Foundation had funded the first federally supported effort to develop new curricula at the high school level. Thus what was to be education's most hopeful decade opened with what was perhaps its most ambitious undertaking: full-scale curricular reform projects in the sciences and mathematics. Projects to reform English and social studies curriculum soon ensued, as well.

The great ferment of the early Sixties became education in the national interest. Excellence was its goal and curriculum reform was its centerpiece. Harvard psychologist, James Bruner emerged as chief theoretician for the new movement. In his book,

The Process of Education, Bruner set forth his belief that "the foundations of any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development."

Taken together, the attempts at curriculum revision were promethean in scope. Their approach was typical of an era that sought to solve problems by gathering together the "best and the brightest". Curricula could be developed that would encompass the quantum leaps in information created by the knowledge explosion, be consistent with Bruner's dictum and, moreover, be teacher proof as well.

A sense of just how high the hopes were for this effort is revealed by the level of government support it received. Between 1954 and 1975, NSF spent slightly more than 177 million dollars to fund fifty-three separate projects. (Jackson 1980) Moreover, although the NSF had the largest stake at the federal level, it was by no means the only player who contributed to the ante. The major education foundations, the educational and professional associations, and several other government agencies all were drawn into research and development of new curricula. In addition, when education became a growth industry, later in the Sixties, many major national corporations created education subsidiaries that began to produce, promote, and sell texts and teaching aids based on the new curricula.

Thus, curriculum reform advanced on many fronts at once.

The pattern of cooperative development, which the movement pioneered, served as the model for many subsequent reform efforts.

It is difficult, however, to determine precisely how curricula in the schools have changed as a result of all this effort and expenditure. Most observers agree that the changes have not lived up to the expectations of the reformers. What fragmentary evidence there is, concerning the impact of the curriculum reform movement, is mixed. On the plus side, many of the federally funded materials appear to have found their way into the schools, particularly the science curricula. A 1978 NSF-funded survey found over half of the school districts sampled using at least one of these materials in grades seven through twelve. However, no single project was in use in more than twenty-five percent of the districts surveyed. And district utilization rates for the majority of the science curricula ran between ten and twelve percent. The figures for math and social studies adoption were even less encouraging. In 1977, no federally funded math curriculum was in use in more than five percent of the districts surveyed. (Ibid.)

Even when a district reports that materials are in use, little data is available to tell us how the materials are being used and who is using them. The aim of the curriculum reformers was to upgrade both the content of the curriculum and the way in which it was taught. If the new materials have achieved some

success towards the former goal, all reports indicate that the process of education continues in its pre-reform pattern of recitation and teacher demonstration. The so-called discovery method seems never to have been widely adopted. The question becomes, why did such a well-intentioned effort fail to achieve more than these meager accomplishments?

There were several defects in this top-down approach to curriculum building. The new curricula were, at the high school level, completely subject-centered. Reliance on the judgment of university specialists in a single subject area produced individual curriculum packages that may have been up to date in content, but failed to address the need for comprehensive reorganization of the total school curriculum. That is to say, too little attempt was made to blur the disciplines. And here, a great opportunity was missed. Moreover, the university scholars were largely unfamiliar with both the realities of the classroom and the history of previous reform efforts. The reformers either were unaware of, or rejected, the indisputable lesson of previous reform efforts: without changing the way teachers teach and schools and classrooms are organized, all reforms are destined to be blunted at the classroom door.

Also, because the new curricula were, by and large, the result of federally funded work, they were seen in some quarters as an attempt to impose a "national curriculum", which was antithetical to the American tradition of educational

localism. The unfortunate history of MACOS provides an important object lesson in the necessity of building consensus before instituting reforms.

In addition to the curriculum reform movement, the decade witnessed a series of educational innovations championed by various foundations and an activist Office of Education.

Instructional television, A.V., computer-assisted instruction, new approaches to school design, and various other technologies were heralded as inventions which would transform the schools.

Other heavily-funded "innovations" included team teaching, modular scheduling, non-graded schools, programmed learning, individualized instruction, learning centers, language labs, and the list goes on and on. Even as early as 1973, however, the Brown report was concluding that "the decade of innovation had little or no lasting effect on the content of school programs or the quality of teaching and learning." Nor, we might add, did it have much effect on the structure of high schools.

The most significant changes in the high school during this period came as a result of legislative and judicial mandates. The most significant events for the high schools in this decade were precipitated by changes in national demographic, social and political configurations.

In the increasingly polarized atmosphere of the late Sixties public confidence in education began to erode. So did the

national consensus about schooling that Sputnik had helped establish. The public discourse about schooling shifted. Single interests crowded the agenda of public schooling and the proliferation of new demands upon the institution began to take its toll on school effectiveness. Ultimately, this led to the perception of a "crisis in the classroom."

This phrase, coined by Charles Silberman, captured the mood of cultural crisis that was abroad in the land.

Silberman's study, like the Conant report, was funded by The Carnegie Corporation of New York. More than any other reform text since the Conant study, Silberman's eloquent book reached a mass audience.

Published in 1970, Crisis in the Classroom capped a growing line of criticism about the schools that had been accumulating throughout the late sixties.

The schools, it held, were mindless, joyless, obsessed with order, silence and lack of motion. They were intellectually stultifying prisons rather than places of joy and discovery.

Significantly, Silberman connected the Crisis in the Classroom to a larger crisis of authority he saw pervading society. The mindlessness he attacked in schools merely reflected the mindlessness he felt characterized the majority of the nation's social institutions. He explicitly connected the intellectual climate of schools to the cultural context and his assessment of both was less than optimistic.

Professor Cremin noted that the "book quickly became the most respected . . . theoretical statement of latter-day progressivism." But while Silberman was able to point to the English open classroom as a model for elementary school reform, he had no similar models to propose for the high school.

His message in Crisis was that schools should be filled with purpose and thoughts about purpose.

There's little evidence that this suggested reform provoked more than an evanescent response at the secondary level.

Following Silberman's devastating indictment, the stage was set for a comprehensive reassessment of the American high school. Numerous studies and national commissions began to appear by the early seventies.

Their programs called for breaking down the barriers that separated youth from the society at large. Many new approaches were recommended for the schools: action learning, experiential learning, alternative schools, schools within schools, and schools without walls. The very titles of these programs reflect the concerns of the era. Students required more choice, more "real life experience," these reports proclaimed.

High schools, too, the rhetoric went, had become too rigid, and too isolated from other potential educators in the community. They had become "social aging vats."

These reports, unlike either the Conant study or Silberman's work, were all the products of committees, and their rhetoric

reflected their conglomerate approach to authorship.

Youth: Transition to Adulthood, the report of the panel chaired by sociologist James Coleman, is perhaps most characteristic. It charged that "the school system, as now constituted, offers an incomplete context for the accomplishment of many facets of maturation." The contrast between the Conant and Silberman approach cannot be more obvious.

Many of these reports contained accurate perceptions about schools. But many of their recommendations addressed themselves to perceived social pathologies of youth that were transitory.

Over 10 commissions in the early seventies took a crack at "the youth problem." Commenting on just three of them, the Coleman, Martin, and Brown reports, an Office of Education study remarked that the reports "represented an unprecedentedly broad" analysis of the nation's schools. Yet, if the persistence of the Sixties' reforms was ephemeral, the lasting effect of these reports on the schools was infinitesimal. If the history of these reforms were written in terms of their subsequent impact on the basic structure of the American high school, it would be a very short document.

How then do we assess the impact of recent reform proposals on the high school?

On the whole, it has been minimal.

Our field studies, the work of John Goodlad, and the research of many other observers confirm that the structure of

secondary education remains today substantially what it was when Conant examined it in 1959 and declared "no radical alteration in the basic pattern of American education is necessary in order to improve our public high schools."

Schools still open around 8:00 a.m., and shut their doors shortly after 3:00 p.m.

Inside the classroom, students are sorted by a variety of means: principally age-grading and ability grouping.

The academic, general and vocational tracks, which formed the foundation of the Conant comprehensive high school still hold the day despite the more far-reaching recommendations of the reports in the early seventies.

Larry Cuban recently noted in an article for Phi Delta Kappa that "the schools' basic pattern . . . had been constructed within the first two decades of this century."

Elsewhere, Michael Katz has made the similar observation that American urban education had acquired its fundamental structural characteristics by about 1880. Of course, significant developments in education have occurred since then, but they have done little to alter the basic pattern.

This is not the place to outline a list of needed reforms. However, one thing is clear from our research: the tasks which the high schools have been called upon to accomplish have proliferated in the last quarter-century. The result has too often been a confusion over purposes and goals that has weakened

the institution and eroded public support for public schooling.

Back to basics, minimum competency exams, and other school accountability movements are all grass-roots responses to this blurring of goals.

They are also part of an inevitable conservative reaction to the more liberal reforms of the Sixties and early Seventies. To this extent, the pendulum model of school reform is viable: liberal reforms seem to provoke conservative responses, such responses are followed by a correction, and so it goes.

The real point here, however, is the persistence of the characteristic structure of secondary education over time, despite the pendulum swings in the rhetoric of reform.

In the past, numerous critics, Professor Passow among them, have pointed to the gap between the rhetoric of reform and the reality of change, questioning the impact such reports have at the local level.

Hollis Caswell noted in 1946 that change "rests with the individual school . . . with a principal and a group of teachers working with the problems of a given community and its youth. . . ."

Our observations in schools bear this judgment out. As Dr. Hampel has indicated, particularly outside urban areas, high schools reflect their communities. To be lasting, educational reforms must coincide with prevailing community attitudes towards education.

It's also clear that reform proposals, like Zeno's Arrow, constantly race towards a moving target they can never hope to overtake.

That being the case, what function do they serve?

In 1976, reviewing the Coleman, Martin, and Brown reports, all of which appeared in the early seventies, Timpane, et al., noted: "commission studies . . . have become in the U.S. . . . important parts of the societal reaction to immediate, serious problems. . . ."

Indeed, such reports are by their nature reactive. Their analytical frameworks tend to be post-dictive but not predictive.

And their recommendations frequently run the risk of becoming cultural artifacts in very short order.

The reforms of the seventies are a case in point.

Their unitary view of youth culture as societal threat skewed many of their recommendations. Their measures to promote better youth socialization were made in the wake of the baby boom that had recently passed through the school. But that baby boom quickly became a baby bust. Many of these reports' recommendations seem beside the point now that the inter-generational conflict of the late sixties has become less of a problem on campuses and in the schools. However, the student apathy and anomie they warned against remain. They are still serious concerns.

Some demographers predict that an echo of the boom will engulf the schools in 20 years or so. But, by then, the moving target of social and cultural change will have moved far beyond the mark of these reports.

Nevertheless, such reports can, and sometimes do, importantly influence the climate for reform at the local level by helping to build consensus. In short, the rhetoric of such national commissions is an important element in the process of reform, but not the determining factor. Indeed, encouraging public debate about the goals of the school is often the primary objective of these national reports.

Thus, to answer Professor Passow's question, the rhetoric of reform is, in many cases the reality. The discourse of reform awaits a Foucault (or at least Professor Cremin's next volume) to provide us with a complete exposition of its mechanisms of control.

In any event, the reform reports of the last decade failed to catalyze grassroots' support for their recommendations or mobilize a new consensus about education. The inadequacy of the old rhetoric indicates the need to develop a new language of reform. And those who would attempt such a task had best possess a combination of skepticism and optimism.

* * *

Finally, will the current crop of reform reports fare any differently?

It's too soon to tell. Obviously, those of us at this table hope they will.

We have the advantage of a stronger base of educational theory and research to draw upon than our predecessors had. Some of the recent school effectiveness literature is a case in point.

I believe we share a more realistic view of the process and limitations of reform. And this is largely the result of advances in our historical understanding.

Also, many of the current reports are paying closer attention to classroom practice and curriculum: two areas of concern conspicuously lacking in some recent proposals to reform secondary education.

Finally, the example of rising achievement levels in the elementary schools provide us with evidence that reforms can make a difference.

Harold Howe, a former commissioner of education and former vice-president of the Ford Foundation, has noted that it took almost 15 years of controversy and persistent effort to bring demonstrable change in our elementary schools. It required a strong federal commitment, including such programs as Headstart, Title I, and Follow-Through which targeted massive amounts of federal money into elementary school improvements. These efforts appear to be paying off.

Howe emphasized that success may be more difficult and longer in coming for the high school for a variety of fiscal, pedagogical, and organizational reasons.

His time perspective is a useful palliative for those who see high school reform solely in terms of another "quick fix" for the nation's schools.

The process of reform is complex. The high school has proved to be relatively impervious to change. It responds most of all to local demands. Non-legislated reform must proceed, as Caswell noted, from the ground up. Consensus over educational goals is thus an essential pre-condition for system-wide reforms. I would submit that the current round of high school studies offers hope that the process of consensus building has begun.